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Internet Giants Join Forces As 'Neighbors' To Combat Spam

By RIVA RICHMOND
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NEW YORK -- Putting aside usually heated rivalries, Internet giants Yahoo Inc. (YHOO), Microsoft Corp. (MSFT), EarthLink Inc. (ELNK) and Time Warner Inc. (TWX) unit America Online Inc., came together Tuesday to issue a broad set of industry recommendations for fighting **spam** .

The companies unveiled "good neighbor" practices for both e-mail service providers and e-mail senders, including e-mail marketers, that emerged from more than a year debate among members of Anti-Spam Technical Alliance, an industry group that includes a number of other large technology companies.

"Industry self-regulation is an important component to solving the problem" of unwanted e-mail, said Ryan Hamlin, general manager of the Anti-Spam Technology & Strategy Team at Microsoft. "We're four fierce competitors getting together today and saying, 'we have one common enemy: the spammer.'"

The centerpiece was a call to e-mail system operators to begin adopting emerging e-mail sender authentication technologies that could end the faking, or "spoofing," of e-mail sender names, a tactic used heavily by spammers, virus writers and identity thieves. By getting a handle on sender identity, service providers say they will be able to filter out **spam** and other e-mail blights more easily and with fewer good e-mails getting caught up in the net.

The companies will begin to stress-test two technology types on their networks this summer, which will also be made available for free to other e-mail system operators, including through software makers like SendMail Inc. They hope to publish findings on how well the technologies work by the end of the year and move toward establishing a technology standard.

"This signals the beginning of a widespread test," said Stephen Currie, director of product management at EarthLink. "We're urging people to participate."

One of the technology types, which has been championed by Microsoft and America Online, would verify the domain names of e-mail senders' addresses. The leading contender for a standard, Sender ID, which will merge Microsoft's Caller ID proposal and SPF, a proposal pushed by America Online, is expected to be completed in the next several weeks. A second technology, created by Yahoo and called DomainKeys, would use cryptography to establish actual proof of senders' identities.

The four Internet heavyweights also urged other e-mail service providers to aggressively police their networks for computers infected with "zombie" programs, which have turned large

numbers of average users into unwitting spammers.

They urged others to join them in closely watching user accounts for signs of zombie behavior, such as large volumes of outgoing e-mail, and helping customers to get rid of the nefarious programs. All four of the companies have partnerships with security software makers they leverage to help keep their users safe from viruses and other malicious programs.

Many widespread viruses in recent years have planted zombie programs on PCs to make them relay points for **spam** . Microsoft said as much as 40% of the **spam** received by Hotmail users now comes from zombie-infected PCs, while America Online said in one day of monitoring, some 89% of **spam** came from the rogue machines.
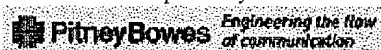
The Anti-Spam Technical Alliance also came up with a number of best-practices for companies that use e-mail for marketing purposes that would help separate them from abusive spammers, including getting the consent of people they e-mail, registering with safelist providers, allowing people to opt-out of their e-mail lists and refraining from using bogus domain names.

"We're not trying to crimp business," said Brian Sullivan, senior technical director at America Online. The companies just want to provide good service to frustrated e-mail users, and users rarely complain about getting commercial e-mail they consented to receive.

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